

Mother Goose in Prose

By

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Introduction.

None of us, whether children or adults, needs an introduction to Mother Goose. Those things which are earliest impressed upon our minds cling to them most tenaciously. The snatches sung in the nursery are never forgotten, nor are they ever recalled without bringing back with them myriads of slumbering feelings and half-forgotten images.

We hear the sweet, low voice of the mother, singing soft lullabies to her darling, and see the kindly, wrinkled face of the grandmother as she croons the old ditties to quiet our restless spirits. One generation is linked to another by the everlasting spirit of song; the ballads of the nursery follow us from childhood to old age, and they are readily brought from memory's recesses at any time to amuse our children or our grandchildren.

The collection of jingles we know and love as the "Melodies of Mother Goose" are evidently drawn from a variety of sources. While they are, taken altogether, a happy union of rhyme, wit, pathos, satire and sentiment, the research after the author of each individual verse would indeed be hopeless. It would be folly to suppose them all the composition of uneducated old nurses, for many of them contain much reflection, wit and melody. It is said that Shelley wrote "Pussy-Cat Mew," and Dean Swift "Little Bo-Peep," and these assertions are as difficult to disprove as to prove. Some of the older verses, however, are doubtless offshoots from ancient Folk Lore Songs, and have descended to us through many centuries.

The connection of Mother Goose with the rhymes which bear her name is difficult to determine, and, in fact, three countries claim her for their own: France, England and America.

About the year 1650 there appeared in circulation in London a small book, named "Rhymes of the Nursery; or Lulla-Byes for Children," which contained many of the identical pieces that have been handed down to us; but the name of Mother Goose was evidently not then known. In this edition were the rhymes of "Little Jack Homer," "Old King Cole," "Mistress Mary," "Sing a Song o' Sixpence," and "Little Boy Blue."

In 1697 Charles Perrault published in France a book of children's tales entitled "Contes de ma Mere Oye," and this is really the first time we find authentic record of the use of the name of Mother Goose, although Perrault's tales differ materially from those we now know under this title. They comprised "The Sleeping Beauty," "The Fairy," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Blue Beard," "Puss in Boots" "Riquet with the Tuft," "Cinderella," and "Little Thumb"; eight stories in all. On the cover of the

book was depicted an old lady holding in her hand a distaff and surrounded by a group of children listening eagerly. Mr. Andrew Lang has edited a beautiful English edition of this work (Oxford, 1888).

America bases her claim to Mother Goose upon the following statement, made by the late John Fleet Eliot, a descendant of Thomas Fleet, the printer:

At the beginning of the eighteenth century there lived in Boston a lady named Eliza Goose (written also Vergoose and Vertigoose) who belonged to a wealthy family. Her eldest daughter, Elizabeth Goose (or Vertigoose), was married by Rev. Cotton Mather in 1715 to an enterprising and industrious printer named Thomas Fleet, and in due time gave birth to a son. Like most mothers-in-law in our day, the importance of Mrs. Goose increased with the appearance of her grandchild, and poor Mr. Fleet, half distracted with her endless nursery ditties, finding all other means fail, tried what ridicule could effect, and actually printed a book under the title "Songs of the Nursery; or, Mother Goose's Melodies for Children." On the title page was the picture of a goose with a very long neck and a mouth wide open, and below this, "Printed by T. Fleet, at his Printing House in Pudding Lane, 1719. Price, two coppers."

Mr. Wm. A. Wheeler, the editor of Hurd & Houghton's elaborate edition of Mother Goose, (1870), reiterated this assertion, and a writer in the Boston Transcript of June 17, 1864, says: "Fleet's book was partly a reprint of an English collection of songs (Barclay's), and the new title was doubtless a compliment by the printer to his mother-in-law Goose for her contributions. She was the mother of sixteen children and a typical 'Old Woman who lived in a Shoe.'"

We may take it to be true that Fleet's wife was of the Vergoose family, and that the name was often contracted to Goose. But the rest of the story is unsupported by any evidence whatever. In fact, all that Mr. Eliot knew of it was the statement of the late Edward A. Crowninshield, of Boston, that he had seen Fleet's edition in the library of the American Antiquarian Society. Repeated researches at Worcester having failed to bring to light this supposed copy, and no record of it appearing on any catalogue there, we may dismiss the entire story with the supposition that Mr. Eliot misunderstood the remarks made to him. Indeed, as Mr. William H. Whitmore points out in his clever monograph upon Mother Goose (Albany, 1889), it is very doubtful whether in 1719 a Boston printer would have been allowed to publish such "trivial" rhymes. "Boston children at that date," says Mr. Whitmore, "were fed upon Gospel food, and it seems extremely improbable that an edition could have been sold."

Singularly enough, England's claim to the venerable old lady is of about the same date as Boston's. There lived in a town in Sussex, about the year 1704, an old

woman named Martha Gooch. She was a capital nurse, and in great demand to care for newly-born babies; therefore, through long years of service as nurse, she came to be called Mother Gooch. This good woman had one peculiarity: she was accustomed to croon queer rhymes and jingles over the cradles of her charges, and these rhymes "seemed so senseless and silly to the people who overheard them" that they began to call her "Mother Goose," in derision, the term being derived from Queen Goosefoot, the mother of Charlemagne. The old nurse paid no attention to her critics, but continued to sing her rhymes as before; for, however much grown people might laugh at her, the children seemed to enjoy them very much, and not one of them was too peevish to be quieted and soothed by her verses. At one time Mistress Gooch was nursing a child of Mr. Ronald Barclay, a physician residing in the town, and he noticed the rhymes she sang and became interested in them. In time he wrote them all down and made a book of them, which it is said was printed by John Worthington & Son in the Strand, London, in 1712, under the name of "Ye Melodious Rhymes of Mother Goose." But even this story of Martha Gooch is based upon very meager and unsatisfactory evidence.

The earliest English edition of Mother Goose's Melodies that is absolutely authentic was issued by John Newbury of London about the year 1760, and the first authentic American edition was a reprint of Newbury's made by Isaiah Thomas of Worcester, Mass., in 1785.

None of the earlier editions, however, contained all the rhymes so well known at the present day, since every decade has added its quota to the mass of jingles attributed to "Mother Goose." Some of the earlier verses have become entirely obsolete, and it is well they have, for many were crude and silly and others were coarse. It is simply a result of the greater refinement of modern civilization that they have been relegated to oblivion, while the real gems of the collection will doubtless live and grow in popular favor for many ages.

While I have taken some pains to record the various claims to the origin of Mother Goose, it does not matter in the least whether she was in reality a myth, or a living Eliza Goose, Martha Gooch or the "Mere Oye" of Perrault. The songs that cluster around her name are what we love, and each individual verse appeals more to the childish mind than does Mother Goose herself.

Many of these nursery rhymes are complete tales in themselves, telling their story tersely but completely; there are others which are but bare suggestions, leaving the imagination to weave in the details of the story. Perhaps therein may lie part of their charm, but however that may be I have thought the children might like the stories told at greater length, that they may dwell the longer upon their favorite heroes and heroines.

For that reason I have written this book.

In making the stories I have followed mainly the suggestions of the rhymes, and my hope is that the little ones will like them, and not find that they interfere with the fanciful creations of their own imaginations.

L Frank Baum

Chicago, Illinois, September, 1897.

Sing a Song o' Sixpence

Sing a Song o' Sixpence

Sing a song o' sixpence, a handful of rye, Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked
in a pie; When the pie was opened the birds began to sing, Was not that a
dainty dish to set before the King?

If you have never heard the legend of Gilligren and the King's pie, you will scarcely understand the above verse; so I will tell you the whole story, and then you will be able to better appreciate the rhyme.

Gilligren was an orphan, and lived with an uncle and aunt who were very unkind to him. They cuffed him and scolded him upon the slightest provocation, and made his life very miserable indeed. Gilligren never rebelled against this treatment, but bore their cruelty silently and with patience, although often he longed to leave them and seek a home amongst kinder people.

It so happened that when Gilligren was twelve years old the King died, and his son was to be proclaimed King in his place, and crowned with great ceremony. People were flocking to London from all parts of the country to witness the festivities, and the boy longed to go with them.

One evening he said to his uncle,

"If I had sixpence I could make my fortune."

"Pooh! nonsense!" exclaimed his uncle, "a sixpence is a small thing. How then could you make a fortune from it?"

"That I cannot tell you," replied Gilligren, "but if you will give me the sixpence I will go to London, and not return until I am a rich man."

"The boy is a fool!" said his uncle, with anger; but the aunt spoke up quickly.

"Give him the money and let him go," she said, "and then we shall be well rid of him and no longer be obliged to feed and clothe him at our expense."

"Well," said her husband, after a moment's thought, "here is the money; but remember, this is all I shall ever give you, and when it is gone you must not come to me for more."

"Never fear," replied Gilligren, joyfully, as he put the sixpence in his pocket, "I shall not trouble you again."

The next morning he cut a short stick to assist him in walking, and after bidding goodbye to his uncle and aunt he started upon his journey to London.

"The money will not last him two days," said the man, as he watched Gilligren go down the turnpike road, "and when it is gone he will starve to death."

"Or he may fall in with people who will treat him worse than we did," rejoined the woman, "and then he 'll wish he had never left us."

But Gilligren, nothing dismayed by thoughts of the future, trudged bravely along the London road. The world was before him, and the bright sunshine glorified the dusty road and lightened the tips of the dark green hedges that bordered his path. At the end of his pilgrimage was the great city, and he never doubted he would find therein proper work and proper pay, and much better treatment than he was accustomed to receive.

So, on he went, whistling merrily to while away the time, watching the sparrows skim over the fields, and enjoying to the full the unusual sights that met his eyes. At noon he overtook a carter, who divided with the boy his luncheon of bread and cheese, and for supper a farmer's wife gave him a bowl of milk. When it grew dark he crawled under a hedge and slept soundly until dawn.

The next day he kept steadily upon his way, and toward evening met a farmer with a wagon loaded with sacks of grain.

"Where are you going, my lad?" asked the man.

"To London," replied Gilligren, "to see the King crowned."

"Have you any money?" enquired the farmer.

"Oh yes," answered Gilligren, "I have a sixpence."

"If you will give me the sixpence," said the man, "I will give you a sack of rye for it."

"What could I do with a sack of rye?" asked Gilligren, wonderingly.

"Take it to the mill, and get it ground into flour. With the flour you could have bread baked, and that you can sell."

"That is a good idea," replied Gilligren, "so here is my sixpence, and now give me the sack of rye."

The farmer put the sixpence carefully into his pocket, and then reached under the seat of the wagon and drew out a sack, which he cast on the ground at the boy's feet.

"There is your sack of rye," he said, with a laugh.

"But the sack is empty!" remonstrated Gilligren.

"Oh, no; there is some rye in it."

"But only a handful!" said Gilligren, when he had opened the mouth of the sack and gazed within it.

"It is a sack of rye, nevertheless," replied the wicked farmer, "and I did not say how much rye there would be in the sack I would give you. Let this be a lesson to you never again to buy grain without looking into the sack!" and with that he whipped up his horses and left Gilligren standing in the road with the sack at his feet and nearly ready to cry at his loss.

"My sixpence is gone," he said to himself, "and I have received nothing in exchange but a handful of rye! How can I make my fortune with that?"

He did not despair, however, but picked up the sack and continued his way along the dusty road. Soon it became too dark to travel farther, and Gilligren stepped aside into a meadow, where, lying down upon the sweet grass, he rolled the sack into a pillow for his head and prepared to sleep.

The rye that was within the sack, however, hurt his head, and he sat up and opened the sack.

"Why should I keep a handful of rye?" he thought, "It will be of no value to me at all."

So he threw out the rye upon the ground, and rolling up the sack again for a pillow, was soon sound asleep. When he awoke the sun was shining brightly over his head and the twitter and chirping of many birds fell upon his ears. Gilligren opened his eyes and saw a large flock of blackbirds feeding upon the rye he had scattered upon the ground. So intent were they upon their feast they never noticed Gilligren at all.

He carefully unfolded the sack, and spreading wide its opening threw it quickly over the flock of black birds. Some escaped and flew away, but a great many were caught, and Gilligren put his eye to the sack and found he had captured four and twenty. He tied the mouth of the sack with a piece of twine that was in his

pocket, and then threw the sack over his shoulder and began again his journey to London.

"I have made a good exchange, after all," he thought, "for surely four and twenty blackbirds are worth more than a handful of rye, and perhaps even more than a sixpence, if I can find anyone who wishes to buy them."

He now walked rapidly forward, and about noon entered the great city of London.

Gilligren wandered about the streets until he came to the King's palace, where there was a great concourse of people and many guards to keep intruders from the gates.

Seeing he could not enter from the front, the boy walked around to the rear of the palace and found himself near the royal kitchen, where the cooks and other servants were rushing around to hasten the preparation of the King's dinner.

Gilligren sat down upon a stone where he could watch them, and laying the sack at his feet was soon deeply interested in the strange sight. Presently a servant in the King's livery saw him and came to his side.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, roughly.

"I am waiting to see the King," replied Gilligren.

"The King! The King never comes here," said the servant; "and neither do we allow idlers about the royal kitchen. So depart at once, or I shall be forced to call a guard to arrest you."

Gilligren arose obediently and slung his sack over his shoulder. As he did so the birds that were within began to flutter.

"What have you in the sack?" asked the servant.

"Blackbirds," replied Gilligren.

"Blackbirds!" echoed the servant, in surprise, "well, that is very fortunate indeed. Come with me at once!"

He seized the boy by the arm and drew him hastily along until they entered the great kitchen of the palace.

"Here, Mister Baker!" the man called, excitedly, "I have found your blackbirds!"

A big, fat man who was standing in the middle of the kitchen with folded arms and a look of despair upon his round, greasy face, at once came toward them and asked eagerly, "The blackbirds? are you sure you can get them?"

"They are here already; the boy has a bag full of them."

"Give them to me," said the cook, who wore a square cap, that was shaped like a box, upon his head.

"What do you want with them?" asked Gilligren.

"I want them for a pie for the King's dinner," answered Mister Baker; "His Majesty ordered the dish, and I have hunted all over London for the blackbirds, but could not find them. Now that you have brought them, however, you have saved me my position as cook, and perhaps my head as well."

"But it would be cruel to put the beautiful birds in a pie," remonstrated Gilligren, "and I shall not give them to you for such a purpose."

"Nonsense!" replied the cook, "the King has ordered it; he is very fond of the dish."

"Still, you cannot have them," declared the boy stoutly, "the birds are mine, and I will not have them killed."

"But what can I do?" asked the cook, in perplexity; "the King has ordered a blackbird pie, and your birds are the only blackbirds in London."

Gilligren thought deeply for a moment, and conceived what he thought to be a very good idea. If the sixpence was to make his fortune, then this was his great opportunity.

"You can have the blackbirds on two conditions," he said.

"What are they?" asked the cook.

"One is that you will not kill the birds. The other condition is that you secure me a position in the King's household."

"How can I put live birds in a pie?" enquired the cook.

"Very easily, if you make the pie big enough to hold them. You can serve the pie after the King has satisfied his hunger with other dishes, and it will amuse the company to find live birds in the pie when they expected cooked ones."

"It is a risky experiment," exclaimed the cook, "for I do not know the new King's temper. But the idea may please His Majesty, and since you will not allow me to kill the birds, it is the best thing I can do. As for your other condition, you seem to be a very bright boy, and so I will have the butler take you as his page, and you shall stand back of the King's chair and keep the flies away while he eats."

The butler being called, and his consent secured, the cook fell to making the crusts for his novel pie, while Gilligren was taken to the servants' hall and dressed in a gorgeous suit of the King's livery.

When the dinner was served, the King kept looking for the blackbird pie, but he said nothing, and at last the pie was placed before him, its crusts looking light and brown, and sprigs of myrtle being stuck in the four corners to make it look more inviting.

Although the King had already eaten heartily, he smacked his lips when he saw this tempting dish, and picking up the carving-fork he pushed it quickly into the pie.

At once the crust fell in, and all the four and twenty blackbirds put up their heads and began to look about them. And coming from the blackness of the pie into the brilliantly lighted room they thought they were in the sunshine, and began to sing merrily, while some of the boldest hopped out upon the table or began flying around the room.

At first the good King was greatly surprised; but soon, appreciating the jest, he lay back in his chair and laughed long and merrily. And his courtiers and the fine ladies present heartily joined in the laughter, for they also were greatly amused.

Then the King called for the cook, and when Mister Baker appeared, uncertain of his reception, and filled with many misgivings, His Majesty cried,

"Sirrah! how came you to think of putting live birds in the pie?"

The cook, fearing that the King was angry, answered,

"May it please your Majesty, it was not my thought, but the idea of the boy who stands behind your chair."

The King turned his head, and seeing Gilligren, who looked very well in his new livery, he said,

"You are a clever youth, and deserve a better position than that of a butler's lad. Hereafter you shall be one of my own pages, and if you serve me faithfully I will advance your fortunes with your deserts."

And Gilligren did serve the King faithfully, and as he grew older acquired much honor and great wealth.

"After all," he used to say, "that sixpence made my fortune. And it all came about through such a small thing as a handful of rye!"